

The Dionysian Authorship of the "Corpus Areopagiticum" According to Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae



[On October 3rd I posted a few texts by the Rev. John Parker in which he set out to prove, against most scholarly opinions of the late 19th century, that the writings of St. Dionysius the Areopagite are authentic 1st or early 2nd century writings written by the author they are ascribed to. The only Orthodox scholar I was aware of that defended this patristic thesis was Fr. John Romanides, who even though he wrote nothing to my knowledge on the subject, nevertheless defended it in passing in an audio lecture I have in which he comments sarcastically: "Modern theologians call St. Dionysius a 'pseudo' as if he is a liar or deceiver, which they make him out to be". It was brought to my attention at that time by Vlad Protopopescu that the eminent Romanian Orthodox theologian Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae also defended this thesis in his last writing before his falling asleep in the Lord, which happened to be his translation of the entire *Corpus Areopagiticum*. According to Vlad, this was a thesis he defended in the academia but it was quickly dismissed without consideration. Since one of my many goals is to liberate St. Dionysius from the fetters of the academics who dismiss him as a neoplatonic wannabe, I asked Vlad to translate the "Introduction" to Fr. Dumitru's translation in which Fr. Dumitru defends the apostolic dating of the *Corpus Areopagiticum*. To put the "Introduction" in its proper context, Vlad has informed me of the following:

"It should be mentioned that Fr. Staniloae answered to very specific issues, namely to the translations made in

Romania of *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, *The Divine Names*, and *The Mystical Theology* made by Fr. Cicerone Iordachescu, who was a Professor and on the Faculties of Theology at Chisinau and Cernauti, and in collaboration with Theofil Simensky, a Professor of Classical Languages at the University of Iasi (both before the WWII); also to a French translation by Maurice de Gandillac in 1943. My view is that Fr. Staniloae held these opinions since that time (which he expressed in his various courses at the Theological Academy of Sibiu, where he was a professor until 1947 and subsequently on the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest where he offered a course on 'Ascetics and Mystics' until 1949 when the chair of 'Ascetics and Mystics' was abolished). It is very likely that the 'Introduction' to the translation was compiled mainly from notes and last talks, which will account for the apparent "outdatedness" that his critics made much about."

He also says concerning the only passage in the "Introduction" which he did not translate, since it answers a particular theory of one of Fr. Staniloae's students:

"In the 'Introduction' Fr. Staniloae addresses also a recent theory emitted by a Romanian doctor Fr. George Dragulin. According to Fr. Dragulin the real Dionysius was Dionysius Exiguus. Fr. Staniloae, who was the director of the thesis, dismisses it gently, although shows some 'sentimental' sympathy. Dionysius Exiguus was born in Scythia Minor (Dobrogea of today) and the thesis was rather an exercise in national pride. In fact Fr. Staniloae sticks to his guns. Fr. Staniloae's purpose was to combat the idea that one can affirm that Dionysius shows a pantheistic philosophy, as the learned Professors asserted. He quotes the thesis of Fr. Dragulin only to show that he affirms the perfect Orthodoxy of Dionysius who combatted Neoplatonism. Fr. Staniloae's argument is precisely the challenge of Dionysius to the philosophies of his day, which were 'Platonic'."

I am grateful to Vlad and I pray this translation serves to enlighten doubters and faithful alike concerning the apostolic or post-apostolic authorship of these highly revered texts of Orthodox patristics. - J.S.]

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae (1903 – 1993) was undoubtedly a great contemporary Orthodox theologian and a Christian thinker of “truly ecumenical proportions” (Charles Miller, *The Gift of the World: An Introduction to the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae*). Olivier Clement, the French Orthodox, declared that the 20th century has known only three true theologians: Vladimir Losski, Fr. Justin Popovic and Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae. He was a pioneer in the return of theological thinking to the Fathers of the Church which occurred in the first part of the 20th century. He translated into Romanian a great number of the writings of the Fathers, being a pioneer also in the revival of St. Gregory Palamas, being the first to publish unknown manuscripts of the saint that he discovered in Paris. His *Life and Teaching of St. Gregory Palamas*, was published in Romanian in 1938 and therefore unfortunately remained virtually unknown for a long time. His translation of the *Philokalia* of St. Nicodemus (to which he added a great number of other writings, so that now people speak of the "Philokalia of Stăniloae"), of Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa is the proof of his complete mastery of the mystical/ascetical tradition of Orthodoxy in which he was immersed, not only in the “academic” mode, but living it as well. He was in permanent contact with the monastic life, very rich at all times in Romania, where the hesychast tradition is still alive and

great spiritual fathers and mothers still talk to the people. His very last work, published posthumously (1996), was a translation into Romanian of the *Complete Works of St. Dionysius the Areopagite*, together with the *Scholia of St. Maximus the Confessor* and a number of his own commentaries. Fr. Stăniloae was definitely a defender of the traditional attribution of the *Areopagitica* to the disciple of St. Paul. In his "Introduction" he offers a series of arguments which point to the validity of the traditional attribution. Needless, but sadly, to say that a new generation of "patrologists" with doctorates at "the most prestigious Western Universities" poured scorn and ridicule on his "gaffes" and "obstinacy" in trying to demonstrate "against all scientific common sense the identity of the author of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* with the disciple of the Apostle Paul, for the sole reason that the thesis 'accepted by all specialists was... occidental'". Here are a few excerpts from the "Introduction" to demonstrate where the common sense was.

Vlad Protopopescu - Sydney



Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Complete Works of St. Dionysius the Areopagite*, "Introduction":

I. The Alleged Neoplatonic Pantheism of the Areopagitic Writings

We can say that the presentation of Dionysius as a pantheist has encouraged in the western Christian world a separatist and secularist vision of the world in relation to God, which in turn

reinforced the philosophies of the world as the unique reality... This understanding was the reason why in the West, Dionysius was suspected as encouraging pantheism, whereas in the East he always enjoyed a great authority as a source of Christian spirituality.

In regards to the alleged pantheistic mark of the areopagitic writings, which would therefore have them written after Plotinus and Proclus, we deem necessary to prove their Christian character. That will allow us to show the uncertainty of a date after Proclus for the writings, and as unfounded the exclusion of the possibility that they have been authored by Dionysius from the Areopagus of Athens who was converted by the Holy Apostle Paul to the Christian faith. This possible conclusion will be enhanced by some other facts, no less conclusive than those adduced by the deniers of the authorship of Dionysius of the Areopagus.

II. The General Christian Content of the Areopagitic Writings and Their Principal Components as a Basis for Their Attribution to Dionysius the Areopagite

We cannot notice in all the areopagitic writings any concern with the defense of the Holy Trinity, any concern with the defense of the teaching about the Christ as hypostasis in two natures, any concern with nestorianism or monophysitism. This suggests that they had been written neither after the First Ecumenical Synod, nor after the Second, the Third or the Fourth, i.e. between the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth. Of course one cannot say that there is no teaching about the Trinity or about Jesus Christ. Also lacking are the developments about the Holy Trinity from the writings of St. Athanasius the Great, St. Basil the Great or St. Gregory Nazianzen. There is no concern with the union of the two natures in the unique hypostasis of the Word from the writings of St. Cyril of Alexandria...

The theme of the Dionysian writings is the defense of the teaching about God in Trinity as different from the world, in other words a defense of the Christian faith in general against the philosophical thinking of the time, but using its vocabulary. Was a rejection of the pantheistic philosophies at the end of the fifth century still necessary? Who could have been keener to win the intellectuals, formed in the mould of the pantheistic philosophies than a philosopher himself? Could he have remained idle since becoming a Christian and not use his gifts in an activity for which he was qualified? He could have put together those writings around the year 100 AD, when the opposition against the Christian teachings was taking shape.

One can raise today the same objection raised by an Orthodox theologian in 533 during his polemic with a Severian Monophysite: How can we be sure that these writings belong to Dionysius of Areopagus, when we cannot see them used by the Fathers since? To this objection one can answer: The writings were not offering any arguments for the defence of the Holy Trinity or of the teachings about Christ. They must have been, perhaps, less copied and they were used in more restricted circles. In general, the Fathers were not perusing too much the writings of the preceding Fathers, but almost exclusively the Holy Scriptures.

But how does the author of the *Areopagitica* defend the Christian Faith, using the philosophical language of the time?

a. He makes a clear distinction between the **being** (trans. n. – in Romanian **ființa**) of all things among which we live and the One above being. In Greek **being** is derived, like in Romanian, from the verb **to be**: it is actually the participle of the verb **to be** (trans. n. – **a fi, ființă**). That is, that **being** is the same as **existence**. The author of the *Areopagitica* uses for God the term **the one above being**, not in the sense of **the highest being**, but in the sense of **beyond existence**. He is not simply existence, but is beyond existence, because all things that exist, as we know them, must have a cause. God is beyond existence because He has no cause, but is the cause of everything. That points to a total difference between God and the world. The author makes an “existential” difference between everything that exists and Him – this gives Him the power to be the sole cause of everything. Dionysius defends the idea of God as totally different from the world, in contrast with pre-Christian philosophies.

b. The author borrows from Plato the idea of the identity of **existence** with **good**. Existence itself is a good. The highest existence is the highest good. But Plato does not draw the conclusion that the good implies an eternal relation between Person and Person, as the author of the *Areopagitica* does.

But God is not simply goodness, but is above goodness. It is goodness caused by nothing and the cause of all goodness. This is a different kind of goodness than the one known by us. The goodness of God is from itself, and is one with perfect freedom.

The stages of existence, dependent of one another, the higher ones obliged to sustain and raise the inferior ones in existence, therefore in goodness, and the inferior ones attracted by the superior ones, are all in a state of dependence between themselves, but also of God who is above all goodness, good in itself, the perfect good. This is the foundation of the celestial and world hierarchies and of their relations. The obligation (of the superior hierarchies) towards the inferior and the attraction of the inferior (ones) towards the higher give an internal basis to the relations between the members of the hierarchies. Dionysius asserts thus not only the existence of a God different from the visible world, but also the existence of a hierarchical order superior to this world, a thing rejected by ancient philosophy.

According to Dionysius, the hierarchy of the entire creation links not only the angelic world with the earthly one, but also all the orders of the angelic world with those of the earthly world. In this hierarchical vision, all the inferior steps receive divine illumination from those above and the superior ones have the duty to communicate these illuminations to the inferior ones. Only the supreme angelic order receives illumination exclusively from God. But that does not mean that God is in direct relations only with the hosts of the supreme order (Thrones, Cherubims,

Seraphims), nor that He is separated from the hosts under them. The orders that follow the first one live also in God, but as united with the first. The first order communicates their knowledge of God to the inferior ones. Not even men can feel the relation with God without a relation with other people, and therefore, albeit unconsciously, with the angels.

Everything that exists in the world is a unit. But there are different degrees of unity between them and an overall unity between all. But these units are composed and dependent on one another and of the One who has nothing composed and is not united involuntarily with others, but is the One by itself and independent of all. He is the Uncaused Cause of all units in the world and of the unity between themselves. The things of the world show that they are dependent on the One who is above everything - that we know as units.

This One, who is also the supreme good by itself, is not opposed to love. His Unity is a living unity, not opposed to the Trinity. His Unity is a unity of love. He is a living One or the One full of love in Himself. Through love He goes eternally out of Himself, remaining eternally in Himself. God remains in Himself and goes out of Himself in Himself eternally, but when He so desires, He goes out of Himself into other things, producing them by creation and wanting to draw them close to Him.

His procession out of Himself does not oblige Him to proceed into the things that are different from Himself. He does not go out of Himself in Himself, as Trinity, in order to create things, as Fr. Cicerone Iordachescu said. Therefore **proodoi** cannot be translated as “emanations” as was done by Fr. Iordachescu.

c. All these attributes of the divinity places Him above understanding. God cannot be characterized by the characters proper to the world. He is neither existence, nor goodness, nor unity, nor understanding... But negation of these attributes has not the meaning of nothingness, but the superior meaning of things above what is proper to the world. The author of the writings stresses very often this fact.

The man attaining sainthood lives in God, rather than explaining Him through rational concepts.

d. Another “existential” difference between God and the world is asserted by the author of the *Areopagitica* when he considers God as non-passive, not exposed to relations and passions, whereas the world, by its very dependence of God, is passive and subject to relations and possibilities of passions. But the passivity of world components has different degrees. The angels are passive, because they are dependent in their being on God, but at the same time they have a responsibility towards Him. But responsibility unites in itself dependence and freedom. They can, therefore, contend against their dependence or responsibility towards God, as some of them have done. An inferior degree of creatures, humans, have not only the dependence from God united with the responsibility towards Him, but also a purely passive part, the body, with its

processes and passions. But man can, through his responsibility towards God, fill his body with the divine powers [energies] and make it participate in the freedom of the spirit. An even inferior degree of creatures has only the passivity of the senses, deprived of consciousness - these are the animals, and the plants. But they have as their reason to exist the sustaining of the physical life of man. At the very bottom of this category is the simple matter of the earth and the minerals, which are purely passive, but also necessary for the life of man.

In pantheism, everything is dependent on everything. There is nothing independent above the whole and everything, because the essence from which everything is emanated is itself subject to a law.

The author of the *Areopagitica* makes therefore a categorical distinction between God and the world. But he also links firmly the world to God. This can be seen from the fact that, on the one hand, God goes out of Himself conferring being upon the things different from Him, and on the other hand He goes out through “processions” (proodoi) to the things in order to “bring” them back to Him, to fill them with the gifts of His goodness. Those who saw a pantheistic character in the writings have confused these two kind of acts or “processions” of God. But, if there is no difference between them, why would God continue to raise to Him and in Him the things brought into existence by Him? The author uses different terms for the bringing into existence of the things of the world, of the angels and man, which he calls **paragein** (to give existence) and for the gifts which he bestows subsequently to the created things in order to rise them to Him, which he calls **proodoi**. It is wrong to confuse the terms.

But the creative act, as well as the acts of enrichment of the creatures through ever increasing gifts, show the creatures inseparably united with God. Although the author speaks of distinctions or separations between the creatures, and between the creatures and God, he does not exclude a certain inseparability between Him and creatures, even when they close themselves to the waves of goodness and superior life which come from Him; because things could not exist if they were not maintained in existence by the Cause who is above all existence. It is impossible to think of a total separation of the world from its Cause.

A very important component of the theme of the relation of God with the world, which is central to the Dionysian writings, is the fact that all things different from God are brought into existence to serve as symbols through which we see the works of God. They have thus a certain capacity to receive in themselves and to transmit through themselves the works of God. Actualizing the things and the human gestures as symbols, they are sanctified and made the means of sanctification of ones through the others. That confers a liturgical character to their existence.

In the earliest Christian times the liturgical life – hymns, sanctifications, blessings - was extremely rich. From its rich extension in the *Apostolic Constitutions* or the Liturgy of St. James, the Liturgy became shorter until it crystallized in the shape of the Liturgy of St. John

Chrysostom. The fact that the areopagitic writings point to a very rich liturgical life of the Christian communities is another proof of their antiquity. The Orthodox East, the faithful keeper of the apostolic tradition, persists to this day the practice of multiple acts of sanctification, along with the conscience that God is present in all His sanctifying works. Dionysius has influenced the theological explanation of this active presence of God in everything by His works or by His uncreated energies, which are different from his being. We see this in the works of St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Gregory Palamas. The West, rejecting this distinction, as we can see in the opposition Barlaam made to St. Gregory Palamas, and unable to admit a union of men and the world with the essence of God – because that would confound everything with God - has persisted in the conscience of a God distant from the world and people, with a church led by a vicar (a deputy of the absent Christ) and/or has fallen into the extremes of a pantheist mysticism (Eckhart, Jacob Bohme), or in the philosophies that affirm that this world is the only reality.

In the East, as in the areopagitic writings, the Son of God took on human nature in order to make it the medium of our divinization, of our sanctification, which sustain us on the path of a more controlled and holier life. That is why all Fathers, including Dionysius, use the bold terms ‘divinization’, ‘gods’, and of course ‘by grace’... St. Gregory Palamas has found in the writings of Dionysius most of the arguments in his defense of the assertion of the hesychast monks that through the incessant prayer of Jesus they see in their hearts Jesus in light. One can see this in the multiple quotations from Dionysius. Generally speaking the writings of Dionysius have been in the Orthodox world the grounds for the affirmation of the active presence of God in the life of the Church and in the world.

III. Other Indications That Seem to Point to the Post-Apostolic, even Apostolic Age of the Dionysian Writings

In *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius said that Baptism and the Liturgy were performed by the bishop assisted by a few priests but many deacons. In general older people were baptized, but not children. This situation was proper to the early Church, when churches were founded in cities, where bishoprics were founded and the first faithful were older people.

The bishop is also shown performing the burials. Another sign that the writings belong to the early Christian times, when Christians were persecuted, is the mention of the ‘therapeutes’ (doorkeepers or porters), sort of sextons, usually not married, who were guarding the doors of the places of assembly. This service was no longer required in the 5th-6th centuries when the time of persecutions had passed.

Another objection against the antiquity of the areopagitic writings is that in the sixth chapter of *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius described the consecration of monks, which appeared only in the fourth century. But we know that St. Anthony the Great became a monk in the third (he was born in 255). Was he following an older tradition? It is not unlikely that there were a few

Christians who chose the purity of a life of solitude... Maybe they were the therapeutes of the Dionysian *Epistles*, a term that St. Maximus the Confessor translates plainly as “monachos”. (*f.n.*

The linking of the therapeutes of Philo of Alexandria with the first Christian community in Alexandria was made already by Eusebius of Cesareea. St. Jerome affirmed that the monks of his time were perpetuating the life of the therapeutes. John Cassian made the same affirmation ascribing an apostolic origin to the institution. That means that the monastic institution is as old as Christianity itself!)

This is a very poor and general summary of the richness and profundity of the areopagitic writings that our translation is far from rendering it faithfully. Because the language itself is so subtle and complex that nobody can render it satisfactorily. In French they have been translated eleven times... This is the reason that we undertook to offer a new translation (*f.n.* In Romanian, besides those of Fr. Cicerone Iordachescu and Theofil Simensky.) striving to express it in

Romanian terms more traditional and spiritual, avoiding as much as we have been able the neologisms of French origin (*f.n.* Much too current in modern Romanian). This is the reason why we disagree with Fr. Cicerone Iordachescu, when he says: ‘The writing of Dionysius reminds us of the dialectic of Plato and Hegel, without possessing the genius of those great masters of human thought.’ We deem that the thinking of Dionysius is far more satisfactory than Plato’s or Hegel’s.

In conclusion, in view of all the arguments offered, we want to keep the name of Dionysius the Areopagite as the author of these writings. Even if the author was someone living at a later time but he took the name, we respect his will and declare him worthy of the appellation of Saint, as all the Church Fathers did.

As a contribution to the understanding of the Areopagitic writings, we have also translated the *Scholia* of St. Maximus the Confessor. Hans Urs von Balthasar thought that the *Scholia* did not belong to Maximus, but to John, bishop of Scythopolis in Galilee in the first half of the sixth century. But Otto Bardenhewer believed that they belonged to St. Maximus. I think that his opinion is far more probable.